

Does Suffering Prove There is No God?



How Could a Loving God Tolerate Pain and Suffering?

God calls us to love one another. But before anyone can begin this exploration of God's command to love each other, we've got to understand the nature of love, and many of our students are faced daily with people who would deny that there really is a loving god to begin with. It's perhaps the single largest issue in the minds of non-believers! If there is a loving God in our world, then why is it so messed up? Why is there so much pain and struggle? Why is there so much evil?

And if there is no God, then why try to please him by loving others? It's important for us to struggle together to try to understand the nature of suffering and disprove the lie that suffering proves that there is no God. And as we go through this process, I am praying that we will find a way to face the struggles in our own lives, grasping what God is doing in our world:

James Russell Lowell:

Mishaps are like knives that either serve us or cut us, as we grasp them by the blade or the handle.



Suffering As A Proof

It shouldn't surprise us that non-believers look at suffering as a proof that there is no God. If you read history at all, you will recognize that it is filled with war and incredible brutality, and our own nation has engaged in war within its boundaries as well. A brutal, nasty war where many lost their lives and their faith. You also can't help but turn on the news and see a world that is full of poverty and disease. And most of the images we look at involve innocent people who have come to this position as no result of anything that they seem to have done. Many were simply born into their condition. And now in this new world in which we live, we face a new kind of suffering and fear, as terrorism plagues our land and threatens to destroy us. In light of all of this, many are left asking themselves:

“Where is God?”

Many would claim that the condition of our world simply proves that he does not exist. But that lie has two subordinate lies at its foundation. The position is built on one of two lies, that God is either NOT all-powerful, or that God is NOT all-loving. Which of these two positions do you hear the most from your friends? Many would simply say that God is not all powerful:

Gene Roddenberry

“We must question the story logic of having an all-knowing all-powerful God, who creates faulty humans, and then blames them for his own

mistakes.”

Epicurus

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

And some would say that God is not all-loving:

Mark Twain

“If there is a God, he is a malign thug”

Edgar Allan Poe

“The pioneers and missionaries of religion have been the real cause of more trouble and war than all other classes of mankind.”



Suffering at the Hands of Christians

Part of the problem in trying to convince the world that suffering does not prove that God does not exist is, lies in the fact that the unsaved often look at Christians as the SOURCE of evil in their world.

Christianity seems to have a history of conquest and brutality of its own, far from the design and plan of god, and completely contrary to his desire for our lives, but a real history none-the-less.

The problem lies in their inability to understand the nature of suffering and evil, the nature of love and the relationship between the two, so for now, they are choosing to take the easy roads, and simply buy into the lie:

God cannot exist if there is evil and suffering in our world

But when you really examine the source of pain and evil, you will see that the presence of suffering actually proves that there is a loving God.



1 John 4:7-8

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

God is love, but if that is true, how can he stand by and watch his creation be filled with so much pain and evil? We have to understand the nature of love and recognize that love is not free, it can only come with a price. Those of you who have loved know this is true. Love often involves pain. Why is that so? We have to do our best to understand God if we want to understand love, because God IS Love. You won't understand one without understanding the other.



God is All-Powerful

We often say this, but do we really understand what it means? And do we recognize that even an all-powerful God is not able to do everything. As a matter of fact there are some things that God CANNOT do.

1

God Cannot Sin

Holiness is part of his intrinsic nature, He cannot do otherwise. For this reason, we also know that God cannot lie. This places no limitation upon the Almighty. It is simply the necessity of his character. If God has said anything, promised anything, or threatened anything, you can bank on it. God cannot sin, He cannot lie. Why? Because it would be contrary to His NATURE!

2

God Cannot Change

His Being is immutable. His purposes are unalterable. The objects of his love and the measure of his love for them are always the same. He is the same today as he was from the beginning of time. He will not cease to exist. Why? Because it would be contrary to His NATURE!

3

God Cannot Learn Anything New

Before He created anything He knew all about it. There is no progression in knowledge for God as there is with man. God has no limitations on anything that He can create. There is nothing that God does not know. This too is simply a part of his NATURE.

You see, it is quite possible to be all-powerful and still be within the parameters of your nature. Doesn't that make sense? If your nature is truth and love, than everything that you are, is simply a reflection of that nature. It's for this reason that God also cannot contradict truth.

4

God Cannot Contradict Truth

This also places no limitation upon the Almighty. It is simply the necessity of his character. He is not free to act contrary to his nature which is permanent. Does this mean he is not all powerful? No- it means that as a perfect and unchangeable being His commands and actions are rooted in the ultimate truth which flows from his nature. God can only do things that are possible. He can't make square circles or a two sided triangle. It is asking God to bring about a logically contradictory state to his own nature.

Thomas Aquinas

Whatever involves a contradiction is not within the scope of God's Power, because it cannot qualify for possibility. Better, however, to say that it cannot be done, rather than God cannot do it...



God is Love

It's important to understand the nature of God's Power in order to understand the nature of God's Love. But it doesn't always seem to make sense. If God is truly all-powerful why would he create a world in which anything other than love can exist? We need to examine the nature of love



What is Love?

God is clear about the nature of love, and the adults here in the biog church will be examining that over the next few weeks. Today, let's focus on perhaps the clearest passage in all of scripture related to the nature of love.



1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud, or rude. Love isn't selfish or quick tempered. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs that others do. Love rejoices in the truth, but not in evil. Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting. Love never fails!

Have you noticed that this very verse that describes the nature of love, also describes the nature of God! Why? Because God IS Love!



Love (God) Rejoices in Truth But Not in Evil

God is all about truth, not evil. He also hates what he sees here in our world. It is definitely true that our world is full of evil, but that evil does not come from God. He hates evil. Our God is a God of Love.

Truth #1 – God is NOT the source of Evil in this world!



Psalm 57:9-10

Lord, I will praise you among the nations; I will sing songs of praise about you to all the nations. Your great love reaches to the skies, your truth to the clouds.

It's true that we, as Christians, have to explain the presence of evil, and that's what we are going to try to do today, but atheists have a more difficult dilemma. They have to explain both the presence of evil and the presence of Good! After all, we all know that it is in our human nature to act first with GREED or selfishness. You don't have to teach this behavior to a child. They are automatically selfish. Instead Goodness has to be pursued. Where does it come from? Where does our desire to attain perfection and goodness come from if not from a creator God who has placed it in our hearts? Some would say that the presence of Good is, in fact, a PROOF that there is a holy and Good God!



Love (God) is Patient

God is willing to wait for us! That is a huge truth we need to grab onto! Even when all around us is filled with evil and suffering, God is

above all that and sees the end from the beginning! Truth #2 - God does not care about stuff that is temporary!



Isaiah 48:8-9

But you have not heard me; you have not understood. Even long ago you did not listen to me. I knew you would surely turn against me; you have fought against me since you were born. But for my own sake I will be patient.

God does not care about your temporary comfort. He cares only about your eternal character. Sometimes suffering is a very good tool in developing long term character.



Love (God) Doesn't Keep A Record of Wrongs

God is able to stand above evil. Even the evil that YOU have committed in your life. If you can turn from your ways of sin and give yourself to his son, Jesus, he will forget your prior life. Truth #3 – God has the Ultimate Power over Evil, the Power of Redemption!



Isaiah 43:18-19

Forget what happened long ago! Don't think about the past. I am creating something new. There it is! Do you see it?

The world wants vengeance, and that is often the source of evil and suffering. But that is NOT God's nature at all. God is all about REDMEPTION!



Love (God) Never Fails

In the end, love is always the victor over evil, even if we may not see it in this very brief, tiny moment that we call a lifetime. God always wins! Truth # 4 – God will ultimately settle the score on evil.



Isaiah 59:15-18

The LORD looked and could not find any justice, and he was displeased. He could not find anyone to help the people, and he was surprised that there was no one to help. So he used his own power to save the people; his own goodness gave him strength. He covered himself with goodness like armor. He put the helmet of salvation on his head. He put on the clothes of punishment and wrapped himself in the coat of his strong love. The LORD will pay back his enemies for what they have done. He will show his anger to those who were against him

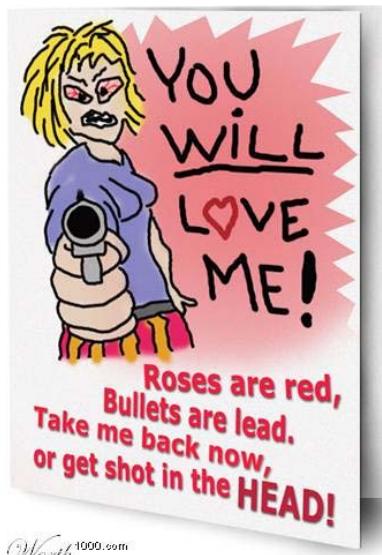
While non-believers are focused on the evil they see in people, we, as Christians know that we have to rise above that and realize that even other Christians are not the truest representation of our God. They too can let us down and fail us. But they are NOT God. He cannot fail us and never will.

OK, are you starting to understand God's Nature? God IS all powerful, but he will not contradict Himself. God IS all loving and that is a permanent part of His Nature. And God WILL NOT DO ANYTHING OUTSIDE OF HIS NATURE!!! So, if God is so loving, why would he create a world in which pain and suffering are even possible? In order to answer this question, we've got to see the relationship between the creator and His creation... If you were to look at all the things that I've created over the years when I was an architect, you would see that even over large periods of time, in projects that had very different requirements, all of my designs were strikingly similar. Even when the shapes were different, they all reflected my nature, my passions, my interests, my being. My creation always reflected the nature of who I am as a human being. God is no different.



The Garden of Eden

A God of love can only design what is true to his nature. We know that God cannot create outside of this nature because he would then be contradicting himself. And we also know that God is love. So therefore, we would expect God to be able to create a perfect world in which love is possible for us as humans. And He has done that. But here's the problem. In order to have a world in which love is possible, you must have CHOICE. You simply cannot love if you cannot choose. There is NO SUCH THING AS FORCED LOVE. And if we are given the choice to love, we will also have to have the choice to hate. One cannot come without the other. And, of course, this perfect ability to choose has changed our world entirely. We often choose sin, because it feels good, it serves our selfishness, or it makes life easier for the time being.



Love Cannot Be Forced

God creates as a result of his nature. God creates a world that has the ability to LOVE. God allows us the ability to LOVE by granting us free will. And many times we use this free will to choose sin. An old Spanish proverb says that “where there is love, there is pain”. Why because the ability to choose love carries with it the danger of choosing hate. One cannot be separated from the other. The reality is that evil and suffering are the result of our own free will. Suffering is the necessary consequence of the incredible gift of free will. Without free will, there can be no love, and a world without love cannot come from a loving God



Is Something Hidden?

OK, we've talked a lot about the nature of God and the fact that suffering and sin come into our world as a product of God's loving and Good gift: the Gift of free will and the capacity to love. But many of us, me included, are still disturbed by the fact that even innocent babies suffer in this world, long before they are ever able to make right or wrong choices. How can this be love? How can God allow it to happen? When we are suffering beyond belief, or watching others suffer beyond description, we must always try our best to see it through the filter of what God did for us on the cross.

1 John 4:7-10

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God's plans are a wonderful mystery. A mystery that embraces pain on the road to true joy. A mystery that takes us through valleys on the way to mountain tops we could never have imagined. A mystery that can transport us from heartbreak to ecstasy, if we will only be patient and try to see things from his perspective. It's really hard to do that, don't you think? It's like trying to watch the second episode of a trilogy, with the comfort of knowing, in advance, how the third episode ends.

Now we've all seen the Lord of the Rings Trilogy. The makers of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy were very smart. They shot all three episodes at the same time and just released them year by year. That's smart because you are certain to be able to complete the trilogy. No important actor may die or change his or her mind along the way and prevent the trilogy from being completed. But that was nearly the case many years ago when I was young...



Star Wars

When I was in high school, Star Wars was the talk of all the movie-goers. Millions flocked to see the first movie, and it wasn't until years later that many of us realized that it was really part of a trilogy. So

when the Empire Strikes Back hit the screens, we all flocked eagerly to pay our \$3.50 to see it. But I have to tell you. I was very disappointed. It was a great movie, but it sure didn't end the way I was hoping!

First of all, the primary characters were constantly involved in a struggle for their very lives. There was no peace, and not much in the way of victory! As a matter of fact, Darth Vader really takes to Luke and Leah and Han Solo. Luke even battles with Darth and ends up losing his hand... It seemed as though there was nowhere to turn for help. All the bad guys had kind of ganged up on the good guys. Our side seemed outnumbered and beaten. To make matter worse, Han Solo gets thrown into the graphite ice block thingy and the movie ends without even telling us what's going to happen to him!



Evil Triumphs?

It seems like evil wins. The good guys are beaten and suffering. If the series had stopped here, if the actors had died or decided to call it quits, Star Wars would be recalled as a sci-fi tragedy. Incomplete.

Sad. Dismal... Sometimes it seems that way in life too. Like we're stuck in episode two, and we can't imagine a happy ending. But eventually "Return of the Jedi" came out and we saw how the writers of the trilogy were able to craft success from apparent failure.



Suffering to Blessing

Do you realize that God is the master of turning apparent disaster into eternal glory? As a matter of fact, the road to glory winds right through the worst of suffering. If you've lived very long, you know that is true. The finest marriages have been crafted through painful times. The greatest achievements have weathered the strongest setbacks. Glory is hidden in the suffering.

It may sound crazy, but God's love for us, is demonstrated through pain. We want to think that we understand what love looks and sounds like, but God's ways are mysterious. His love is demonstrated in tragedy... God has given us something incredible through the most horrific, terrible, and excruciating moment of suffering the world has ever known. Imagine the Perspective of Jesus as he approached the cross, knowing full well the depth of suffering he would have to endure.



Desperate Times

These were certainly desperate times, filled with danger and betrayal. Evil loomed at every turn. Hope was hard to find. And as Jesus was betrayed and flogged and beaten, there appeared to be no other way to see the event except as a defeat. How can victory be at hand? Where is God? Jesus was surrounded by evil and suffering. The entire world seemed to be his enemy, screaming for his destruction. His followers were devastated, suffering as they watched in terror. And as he hung there on the

cross, what joy could they find? In this moment of suffering and misery, where is God? How could he allow it to happen? Does not this kind of suffering prove that there is no God?



Evil Triumphs?

Imagine Mary's reaction to all of this. The single worse day of her life. Her son is dead, her hopes are crushed. In that very moment, I think she would have told you that there is NO GOD. I think her despair from a world with this kind of suffering would have been too much for her to bare. If the story ended right here, it would be the tragedy to end all tragedies. But we are still in episode two aren't we?

But we already know that love never fails and that is because God never fails. It's only THROUGH the tragedy that we come to a new life in the resurrected Jesus. A promise of salvation. A promise of a new body. A promise of life everlasting. A promise of the existence of God. Suffering does not disprove His existence. Suffering is part of His existence. How is Jesus able to endure suffering without losing Hope? Scripture tells us:



Hebrews 12:2-3

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Look at this same verse in "the Message" paraphrase version:



Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed — that exhilarating finish in and with God — he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

God has given us a model to follow in times of suffering. A way to resist the lie that suffering proves there is no God. A way to live above the lie. It's all about focus. Are you focused on the suffering or on the savior, the author and perfecter of your faith?



Live Above the Lies

Our ability to endure times of suffering should HONOR our confidence in a loving and powerful God. When we reflect Jesus' nature, we HONOR God.